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ABSTRACT

The study of reading in restricted contexts ultimately short changes children. The continuous proliferation of research data results in teacher training courses that are overloaded with marginally relevant material. A vast number of "teachable skills" are isolated, and well-meaning publishers produce sophisticated but unnecessary materials; moreover, teachers and students waste valuable curriculum time on unnecessary or counter-productive activities. Evidence for these problems can be seen in international comparisons of attainment in countries that spend their resources in different ways, in studies comparing the efficacy of different teaching strategies, in the comparison of reading in school and the reading needed in everyday life, and in studies of the actual effects of efforts in schools in relation to the standards needed for literate survival. Standardized tests of reading based on materials used in teaching cannot indicate whether teachers' efforts are related to reality or anything about functional reading. Only when practical links between the work of the school and the everyday life of the community are forged, will an adequate curriculum for reading development be provided. (EL)

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Reading and Information Skills - a functional approach

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Every year, vast sums of money are being spent on research in reading. Is this expenditure justified?

Most of this money goes into esoteric studies of the reading process and related strategies for teaching reading. But why do we need to read? What do we actually get from reading? What could we or should we be able to get from reading in the cut and thrust of everyday life? These practical questions - questions that are directly concerned with the impact of reading on the lives of people on the streets outside this building - questions that affect people in every village and in every town throughout the world - these questions are right at the bottom of the pile in the academic world.

In the academic world there is, of course, no limit to the number of questions that can legitimately be asked in the course of any investigation. Any lead can be followed, quite properly, in almost any direction. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that so few researchers take time to follow the trail through to the everyday life implications. At best, there is a speculative leap from research findings to instructional possibilities and there the matter ends. There is none of the extensive and painstaking study of all the other related factors, and their complex interactions, that are needed if reading research is to justify its present position in the education system.

By studying reading in such restricted contexts, and deriving educational implications on this basis, the ultimate consumer, i.e., the child, is effectively "short-changed." These sins of omission, however, are compounded by sins of commission on the part of others who look to research for guidance. Thus the continuous proliferation of ^{research} data has the following consequences:

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- 1) courses in teacher training are overloaded with material of very marginal significance or dubious relevance in order to appease the academic taskmasters
- 2) a vast number of 'teachable skills' are isolated and dutifully catered for by well-meaning publishers by means of sophisticated materials which take up a large part of budgets that could be better used in other ways, and
- 3) teachers and students waste valuable curriculum time on activities that are largely unnecessary where they are not actually ineffective or, as in some cases, counter-productive.

Are these changes perhaps a little too sweeping? Am I perhaps exaggerating a little for the sake of effect? Unfortunately not - as the evidence all too clearly shows. "What evidence?" you may well ask. In fact, we can find all kinds of evidence all pointing in this one direction. What is even more disconcerting is that this evidence has been available for some considerable time and we have failed to appreciate its full significance.

The evidence I will refer to is of four kinds. First, there is evidence based on international comparisons of attainment in countries which spend their resources in different ways. Second, there are studies which compare the efficacy of different teaching strategies. Third, there is the comparison of reading in school and what is actually needed in everyday life. Finally, there are studies of the actual effects of all our efforts in schools in relation to the standards needed for literate survival - the ultimate criterion.

First, then, the international level: it was shown by Thorndike (1973) that the largest differences in reading achievement were found, as might be expected, between countries which had a relatively high level of economic development coupled with a long tradition of universal education and those countries that were much less fortunate in this respect. However, comparisons between American, English and Scottish children showed that reading comprehension in the United States was no better, or indeed slightly worse on balance, than in England and Scotland, all three being 'developed' countries. But there was at that time a massive reading industry in the United States and nothing

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that remotely resembled it in the United Kingdom. We might well ask, therefore, what is the point of having a tremendous reading establishment spread throughout the colleges and universities, and expensive time-consuming instructional materials, if they fail to produce any significant differences?

But what about the factors that were found to have such an important and widespread influence on reading achievement, namely, economic development and a long tradition of universal education? These two factors obviously make their impact primarily through the medium of the parent. They help to determine the quality of the experiences that a parent is able to provide from the moment a child is born. The most important effect is that educated parents can provide more intellectual openings for their children. They do this by offering a richer variety of experiences coupled with more thoughtful conversation in relation to those experiences.

Naturally, we cannot ourselves change the two major factors directly - the economy or the educational heritage. Nor do we need to. If it is the parents who really matter then, clearly, we would do well to spend more of our energies and resources in that direction. And we need to help all parents to appreciate just how important their own role is - for not all wealthy, educated parents are 'good parents'. At the same time, we must also help the less advantaged parents to make the very best of what they already have. Most human beings have far more wit, intelligence and imagination than they ever realise. Teachers can help parents, just as they can help children, to unlock their own inner resources and take every advantage of the opportunities for enrichment that do exist in the immediate environment. If these parents lack affluence we may regret this - but the less affluent neighbourhood can provide as much of a challenge as a wealthy suburb - probably more so.

With parents, as with children, we need to start from where they now are. We need to support self-help groups, 'drop-in' groups, and any other kind of contact that will enable parents

to look at themselves and each other, to share their problems and their successes, to learn from each other, and, increasingly, to learn to share with their children in like fashion. That is the bed-rock for further development. At the same time, we must be careful to sustain the all-round humanistic tradition of the good home. The school needs to incorporate much more of this in its own curriculum - taking great care not to reverse the process by imposing the arid practices of our present curriculum and class teaching on the home.

For the second kind of evidence on misplaced priorities we need to take account of research into the relative efficacy of different strategies for teaching reading. It could be that real differences in the operating efficiency of different methods, techniques and teaching materials are actually masked by crude international comparisons of the kind made above. Research in this area, however, has fallen into disrepute since the various grandiose attempts of earlier decades successively failed to demonstrate any conclusive superiority for any single approach (cf. Bond and Dykstra (1967), Corder, (1971) and Vaughan (1982)). We can only conclude on the basis of all this research into methods and techniques that where work in the classroom does make a difference it owes more to the qualities of the teacher than to any reading scheme, or to the specific potions and prescriptions of the currently fashionable academic witch doctor. It is interesting, in this connection, to note how many children learn to read before starting school from parents and siblings who have received no specialised professional training in the teaching of reading!

How then can we help the teacher to develop the qualities that do produce the goods? And what are these qualities?

It would be very strange indeed, would it not, if the qualities needed to be a good teacher were very different from those needed to be a good parent? The teacher, however, has an additional problem - how best to spread her time so that each child can benefit from her support. Clearly, the teacher must be a good organiser - and that means, among other things, knowing how to help children to organise themselves. Good

organisation, however, is not really a solution - it merely minimises the problem in a situation that is far from ideal. With the best will in the world, no teacher can give every child all the help he or she may need or be on the spot every single time that help is most needed. But if children can learn to read at home from siblings, given suitable oversight from the parent, then the other children in any class are an obvious resource. Many teachers already make very effective use of children of all ages in this way and this is a practice that needs to become much more widespread.

Of course, it is not only the child at the receiving end who benefits from this kind of arrangement. Every time one child helps another in reading, or anything else, that child is learning something about the skills of parenting. Such opportunities are not to be missed if we are to educate the next generation of parents more effectively than we did the present generation.

The best way of helping teachers in this situation is to encourage them to tackle the practical problems themselves - working as a team. In this way they can become less dependent on the outside expert - who is never really in a position to solve their problems for them.

The third kind of evidence on misplaced priorities, looks at the reading that our students now do in our schools and compares this with the reading people actually do in everyday life at present. The best source here, although it can only show a small part of the scene, is provided by Mikulecky (1982) and by Murphy (1975). Mikulecky found that about one half of the time spent by Technical students was spent in reading to learn. For High School students the figure was two-thirds. In the world of work, however, only 16% of the reading done by professionals was of this kind and for blue collar workers the figure was 2%. From these, and other comparisons, it is clear that the actual reading diet of students, and their associated reading strategies, are very different indeed from those to be found in the world of work. Murphy (1975) showed that these discrepancies were also to be found between school reading and the broader variety of reading carried out by most adults in every other aspect of everyday life.

At this stage, you might well ask whether this really matters. You might say that school does not have to provide a mirror - the curriculum does not have to reflect the whole of life in all its aspects. Let us, therefore, look at the fourth kind of evidence which shows quite clearly how grotesquely unsuited the curriculum in the economically developed countries really is as a means of achieving acceptable standards for the majority of citizens.

One example is provided by Bormuth (1973-4). This researcher found that one third of a sample of 18 year old High School students, i.e., young adults, did not have the skills to cope with the content of a collection of typical newspaper articles. This ties up with a report by Kellner and Worcester (1979) on the levels of comprehension of the Sun newspaper during an election in the United Kingdom. Although this newspaper was campaigning flat out for Mrs. Margaret Thatcher (Conservative Party) at the time, one third of the readers said it was supporting the Labour Party! Nearly one third said they didn't know or that it supported the Liberal Party.

This kind of evidence of reading incompetence is supported by the studies of reading standards on everyday reading tasks made by Murphy (op.cit.). He found that 10% of an adult sample made more than 80% errors on tasks which were designed to resemble everyday reading tasks as closely as possible. 20% of these adults were found to make more than 53% error scores. More than 50% of this sample got more than 10% of the items wrong. It is little wonder, as Mikulecky (op.cit.) reports, that it cost JLG Industries something like \$1 million annually for correcting errors due to literacy. Low levels of processing are not confined to the general population, however, for Marton and Saljo (1976) found more surface level processing than high level processing even in a University population. So much then for our current levels of achievement in teaching reading as an effective adult skill.

The problem, alas, is that low level processing is actually reinforced by our traditional teaching methods - methods that have, in the past received a great deal of support from the reading specialist. These methods are still widespread. Typically, we ask our students to read a text and then answer

questions - either those in the book or questions we ask ourselves. Questions in text books and reading schemes of various kinds are often based, even today, on some kind of theoretical analysis of comprehension skills such as those reviewed by Clymer (1968). Let us look at this kind of teaching/testing and ask ourselves what it is the student actually learns. The following text contains a number of unfamiliar words - they have not been in regular use for over two centuries so this will give you some idea of the kinds of difficulties your students typically encounter:

Text: The Maily Blonke

The maily blonke was tunfled, like the others, with nice spiss crinet covering its fairney cloots. But it seemed almost samded - lennow, sloomy and drumly - unlike the other blonkes, which had not, of course, eaten any fasels. The fasels were probably venenated. It would be sensible to dispose of them in the flosch.

Demands on Comprehension - Types of Question

- | | |
|--|------------------|
| 1 Which blonke was samded? | (Literal) |
| 2 Why was it samded? | (Inference) |
| 3 How was the maily blonke like the others and how was it different? | (Reorganisation) |
| 4 Is it wise to dispose of fasels in the flosch if they are venenated? | (Evaluation) |

You probably had no difficulty with the first three questions. You cannot answer the fourth question satisfactorily, however, without looking for additional information. In school, we rely to a large extent on second hand evidence - what someone says, or what we read.

Here is some additional information to help you to answer the question as a child might in this situation:

Test 2: Disposing of Venenated Fasels

Venenated fasels should be disposed of well away from where blonkes are likely to roam, as they soon become samded on this diet. It is much better to givel them in the wong than to dispose of them in the flosch.

You can now answer the next question "in your own words" by referring back to what appears to be a definition in Text 1:

5 Definition or

Translation: What does 'samded' mean?

Finally, you can express an opinion about the quality of the

writing:

6 Appreciation: Are the ideas expressed clearly and well?"*

* This example is based on a text used in Merritt (1980).

If you read the two texts carefully - as carefully as you expect your students to read such texts - you would have little difficulty in answering the questions. In doing so, you will have demonstrated your ability in reading comprehension - as commonly taught and measured. But are you any the wiser? How much have you learned - and what is it worth? Certainly, you have shown considerable linguistic skill and considerable intelligence - just like your students. But what is the point?

Instructional practices of this kind provide an extremely damaging hidden curriculum. The students are getting one message time and time again: "Don't worry if you don't really understand what you read - just learn to be clever in manipulating the words." Little wonder, then, that the "intellectual cream", i.e., those who have learned to play this game, are still functioning at such a low level during the university years. One may well wonder, in fact, whether the lecturers themselves, in many cases, function at any different level. Certainly, what passes for 'theory' often looks more like verbal manipulation than any penetrating analysis of underlying realities.

Consider, now, the effect of this kind of 'comprehension' training on the reader's response to all the different kinds of text that bombard us in everyday life. How well are we educating our students as competent adult readers? And how well are we educating them, through this kind of training, to play their part as responsible members of a democratic society?

It is only when we get down to practical issues that we begin to see where we are going wrong. In the case of functional reading, for example, the practical problem is to get the information we need from a text to satisfy some purpose that we had before we even started reading - and in some form that enables us to make proper use of it. The following table provides an example of a format I used in extracting information from a very long and very tedious insurance document:

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House Insurance Cover

	Storm	Flood	Sub- sidence	Theft	Central heating leak	Accident
First £15	X	X			X	X
First £150			X			
<u>Damage due to:</u>						
water courses	X					
Sea	X					
Dam bursts	X					
Frost		X	X			
Own animals						X
Unfurnished & Unoccupied				X	X	
Fences	X					

X = Not covered for

The practical question here is whether this or that insurance policy really covers me in the way I thought it did - and at a reasonable price. Unfortunately, I found to my cost that I was not in fact covered in the way I had assumed from a normal straightforward reading of the document!

Arbitrary questions based on theories of comprehension and set by other people provide a wholly inappropriate starting point for developing functional reading skills. The starting point for effective functional reading must always be a clear specification by the reader of what he or she actually needs or wants. Next comes an attempt to conceive of some suitable format for organising the relevant information - a list, a table, a flow diagram, a ven diagram, or whatever (see Merritt, in press). The reader then seeks answers to practical questions he or she has already posed, modifying the format, and the original questions if necessary, in the light of what he or she reads. This is the kind of process we need to engage our students in in every kind of reading across all areas of curriculum.

In conclusion, standardised tests of reading based on the materials we use in our teaching can never tell us whether

our efforts relate to reality or not. They tell us little or nothing about functional reading. It is only when we base our tests on what we know is happening beyond the walls of the school that we discover that our work is seriously flawed. Unless and until we begin to forge strong practical links between the work of the school and the everyday life of the community we shall fail to provide an adequate curriculum for reading development - or provide that professional level of teaching support which is each child's due.

Can all our children cope? Can we expect them to achieve the higher levels of comprehension that we seek? Any child who can master the basics of his or her native language by the age of five has a vast intellectual capacity. It is surely our duty and privilege to help each child to use it.

As a first step, perhaps we should look again at how we are using our existing resources. We may not, in fact, need more money. We may simply need to use what we have already got more effectively. Perhaps we could start by giving more support to the teacher in the classroom, and to the teachers in each school as a development team. If we can unlock the resources of the teachers themselves we might begin to make more substantial progress. But here, too, we need to move away from traditional practices. Here, too, we need to move away from an effective training in subservience to the 'expert' and encourage that degree of disciplined independence that is the true hallmark of the professional.

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Discussion Report

This is a heavily edited and 'tidied up' version of the discussion. The question and answer format has been retained simply to preserve the general flavour of the debate.

Speaker: You seem to be saying that teaching reading for everyday life means introducing everyday life reading in school. But you also emphasised motivation. Is it really possible to reconcile these two requirements? Can we, for example, expect students to get enthusiastic about filling in, say, income tax forms?

Merritt: I think you've put your finger right on the main problem - and it is certainly a very difficult problem. It becomes a bit easier, however, if we take a developmental perspective. Look, for example, at how almost every child that is born so easily masters his or her first language. Why? Because language washes around the child constantly from birth and is linked time and time again to each child's own specific experiences and needs. Their own early attempts at speech are regularly rewarded so that their language becomes a powerful tool for controlling their world and for relating to other people. If we could make reading as important in the everyday lives of our pupils, so closely linked to their every need, I suggest they would have few problems in learning to read. The problems arise when we try to teach reading, or a second language, in ways which do not relate so closely to the pupils' specific experiences and deeply felt needs. Now we can play all kinds of ingenious, research-inspired games and achieve a certain amount of success - but I do not believe we can hope for any really substantial progress by keeping the school and the community in separate boxes. The traditional curriculum in developed countries has stagnated in an academic backwater. It fails to provide valid social experience. It does not allow the rich array of human needs to find the ever widening expression required for all round personal, social, intellectual and moral development. In these circumstances we certainly cannot expect to succeed simply by sticking lifeless patches of adult reading on an essentially undernourished curriculum.

Speaker: Are you suggesting, then, that we should abandon the traditional structure altogether and simply follow the children's interests?

Merritt: No, some kind of structure is always necessary, otherwise you have chaos. And 'progressive' education has got itself a bad name because the general concept of following the child's interests has never been given any adequate intellectual backbone.

Taking the concept of 'structure' first, I think we need to move towards a curriculum structure that draws on everyday life for its major categories and divisions - environmental care and management, economic management - personal and social, consumer competence and consumer protection, parenting and community roles, leisure pursuits and personal development. Certainly we should always take the pupils' immediate interests as a starting point - but we need to learn how to get them to move, steadily, through discussion and negotiation, to an ever growing awareness of their own longer term interests, of ways in which their own interests can impinge on the needs of others and ways of agreeing and ordering priorities. They can then begin to structure their own ideas within the kinds of categories I have indicated so that the developing structures of the curriculum, at any one time, reflect their own 'world view' - their own conceptual schema or knowledge structures. The traditional curriculum subjects form an important part of these structures. Clearly, however, they are secondary categories, not primary categories. And equally clearly, we cannot achieve the kinds of intellectual and organisational discipline we need by allowing the woolly minded, largely unexamined assumptions of the half-trained 'progressive' teacher to structure his or her own personal brand of hidden curriculum. What we do need is the essential decency of such teachers to humanise the somewhat arid intellectualisation of their more 'hard nosed' colleagues in following this line of development.

Speaker: Is there then no role for academic research?

Merritt: Yes, certainly - but there is no room for academic myopia. My own view is that the most fundamental educational research is precisely what I have just been describing - an activity constantly being conducted by children, teachers, and also members of the community. It is, of course, action research. It is the whole process of enquiry and relevant action that is of prime importance - not any specific

product. If it really is 'relevant', however, there will naturally be some valuable practical outcome and some reflection leading to useful generalisations. This process could, and I believe should, provide a major focus for academic research. This could then provide a more substantial basis for developing further research priorities. Teacher education, initial and in-service, should be an organic part of this general pattern - an 'organic development' model rather than the traditional 'organ transplant' model.

Speaker: Do you see any relationship between what you have been saying and the problem of foreign language teaching where there is no substantial linguistic community to support the work of the school?

Merritt: This is not an area in which I can claim any personal expertise and I can only make a very limited comment. If the foreign language is widely taught, and of high priority nationally, then there is usually some kind of external support already, however slight. For example, there may well be written notices in railway stations and airports in that language. It is a question, then, of seeing how much more might be done - given the will and a bit of imagination. In Japan, for example, you get information about stopping places over the public address system in streetcars. They could give that information in the selected foreign language also. If the foreign language announcement always came first then many people would find it interesting to guess the meanings before receiving confirmation in their first language. Those who don't would at least become more familiar with the phoneme sequences and intonation patterns of the language - that's a good start. What we need, perhaps, is a Ministry of Community Education with responsibility for taking advantage of a much wider range of such opportunities for language learning and other kinds of learning - so that our whole environment provides a potentially educational experience for those who wish to participate. It's happening already in a limited, ad hoc way. Perhaps, it is time to take incidental or opportunistic learning seriously. The very process of living should, after all, be^a continuing educational process.